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Introduction to the special issue on collaborative writing as method of inquiry

Jonathan Wyatt & Ken Gale

In a recent essay, we wrote as the co-editors of a special issue on collaborative writing:

‘In working with the diverse and emergent forms of collaborative writing that are to be found in this edition, we challenge the Humean belief that the past provides us with rules for the future. We see this as working within and becoming constrained by the grooves and striations that have been provided by existing tracks and rails. And so, in many respects, we want this to be a mapping; we would like to think of it as “open and connectable in all of its dimensions” as “detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” and would be delighted if it were “torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual or a group, or social formation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).’” (Gale & Wyatt, 2012, p. 475)

The collection of essays in this current special issue responds to this aspiration spontaneously and unintentionally, picking up on the implicit call to disrupt and open up possibilities. There is more connecting, tearing, reversing, adapting and reworking here than we could have imagined, with the papers coming at collaborative writing as method of inquiry from a range of disciplinary perspectives and orientations to the theme. The collection offers cultural critique, critical engagement, and approaches to collaborative writing practices that inquire and act. We and others have previously claimed (e.g. Gale, Speedy & Wyatt, 2011; Speedy, 2012) that collaborative writing has the potential to disrupt, challenge and open possibilities both in the academy and the wider world. This collection makes a diverse and substantial contribution in ways that not only advance scholarship and pedagogy but which also raise questions about the structures and hierarchies that exist to inhibit its emancipatory and visionary potential.

Collaborative writing as a method of inquiry started life in its own middle by drawing on the one hand from the theory and practice of ‘writing as a method of inquiry’ (Richardson, 1994, 2000, Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) and, on the other, from the collaborative writing practices and communities fostered by Jane Speedy, Bronwyn Davies, Susanne Gannon, and others (e.g. Speedy et al., 2010; Davies and Gannon, 2006; Gale and Wyatt, 2009; Speedy and Wyatt, forthcoming; etc.). Such writing was always inquiry. Richardson’s challenge to the strictures of method, design and forms of data collection and analysis was the becoming of collaborative methodology within this assemblage.

We hope that this introduction activates what Deleuze, St. Pierre and others have referred to as a ‘plugging in’ of the following chapters; and animates through practice and use the desire to produce ‘acts of activism’ (Madison, 2010). As Speedy says:

[T]he continued and explicit practice of collaborative writing amongst social researchers alters the academic spaces they inhabit and the ethical know-how that they come by. In time the (albeit fragile) emergence of this different sense of scholarship and scholarly work and even, perhaps, of what it means to be a human being amidst human beings and other elements can begin to rework and expand the social imagination. (2012, p.349)

Therefore, this collection is intentionally polemical in content and design: through it we claim that collaborative writing as method of inquiry has the potential to work its way into the interstices, fissures and fractures that we see as being evident within the neoliberal project

and to engage with, trouble and destabilise the myths and practices that neoliberalism is clearly designed to promote.

From one perspective, this issue can be seen to offer a group of papers that takes up such a social justice challenge. Claudio Moreira and Marcelo Diversi take Madison's political cue and offer a performance-theoretical text that employs collaborative writing as decolonizing inquiry. In critiquing the domination of solitary writing by 'lone rangers of expertise' they make a claim to challenge 'isolationist and exclusionary ways of knowing' that exclude marginalised peoples from occupying the academy as knowledge makers. Kitrina Douglas and David Carless employ Frank's notion of the 'politics of interpretive privilege' to explore and engage with the question of whose voice, whose body and whose understanding is favoured in writing collaboratively when an understanding is sought in the representation of the lives and experiences of others.

Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, Derek M. Bolen, Satoshi Toyosaki, C. Kyle Rudick, and Erin K. Bolen, in developing a 'community autoethnographic' method of inquiry, argue that independent scholarship is essentially a 'contradiction in terms'. Their dialogic writing is offered as a 'cultural and social intervention'. Kennedy Saldhana and Lisa Klopfer's inquiry challenges researchers from North America and Europe who engage in ethnographic practices in countries such as India by presenting an ethico-political critique of what they claim is a form 'research tourism'. Mary Weems, Durrell Callier and Robin Boylorn – members of The Fire This Time group of Black writers – use multiple genres of writing as their method, drawing love, peace and soul into the foreground of an intensely collaborative political engagement.

Writing our way into this introduction we find ourselves again struggling with our use of 'we' (Gale & Wyatt, 2012). 'Inadvertently our text is littered with 'we's' and there is tension within the entrapments that the literal actuality that such pronouns imply. Some contributions take such received collaborative practices to task, offering both critical engagement with, and alternative methods of inquiry to, some of those found elsewhere in the issue. Neil Jenkins and Rachel Woodward in their examination of authorial and researcher collaboration in contemporary military memoirs explore the 'collaborative co-construction of knowledge between author and researcher as they together search for meaning in the process of authorial production', their inquiry contextualised by the common practice of producing these memoirs as single authored texts. Charlotte Wegener's paper sets up a dialogue with a character A. S. Byatt's novel, *A Biographer's Tale*, and troubles the assumption that collaborative practice always involves the presence of a phenomenologically significant other.

Catriona Macpherson and Chris Jones engage in discussion with the late Scottish poet Douglas Dunn. The writers foreground their different professional backgrounds and approaches as a means of enabling these to be discussed and incorporated into their future research and writing. Sophie Tamas provides an oblique, affective and troubling account that offers a wary reconceptualisation of collaborative practice as a method of inquiry. In 'refusing the "I" of collaboration' Elizabeth St Pierre offers a richly theoretical description of writing 'to think out of the "I" of authorship as I write with authors whose words I adore'.

The authors in this special issue both offer and critique diverse methodologies of inquiry into collaborative writing, opening up spaces for creative theorising. The papers are events where concepts are always being created, always being plugged in, always existent in the activating and contextualising possibilities of becoming (Deleuze, 1994).

Jennifer L. Sonenberg explores the possibilities for innovative collaborative inquiry and pedagogy through the Shakespearean theatrical practice of cue-script acting. She plays with

the Deleuzian resonances of students performing their characters and themselves in the fluid and contradictory intensities of relational space. The practices and dilemmas of ‘give and take’ connect also with Bettina Stumm’s paper, where examines the relationship between generosity and power in collaborative writing. She tentatively delineates an ethics of responsibility in narrative collaboration where collaborators are invited into an ethically charged space to speak, listen and record the stories of vulnerable subjects who have experienced marginalisation, social injustice or severe trauma. Carol Taylor puts into play a hybrid theorisation of collaborative writing that engages telling and writing transitions as a relational spatial practice. In opening up the practice of an ‘appearance of space’, her theorising offers the possibilities of conceptualising collaborative writing as a method of inquiry within the multiplicity of assemblage, which, in turn, ‘JKSB’ and their respondents, Elizabeth St. Pierre and Norman Denzin, consider in their responding to *Deleuze and Collaborative Writing*.

We are suffused with gratitude to our contributors, who have engaged with us in a lengthy, though worthwhile, process. We feel excited about this collection of essays and as we tentatively push this craft out into turbulent waters we are aware that all these writings need to be placed under erasure. With our postmodern (un)certainities already destabilising our vessel, we realise that any introductory reflections that might be offered cannot mirror any kind of reality. Rather, we hope that these pages will open up diffractive possibilities (Barad, 2007); that reading this collection will prompt nomadic journeying into the uncharted waters of the not yet known; that words like ‘collaborative’, ‘writing’, ‘method’ and ‘inquiry’ will lose any given-ness their various usages here might suggest; and that in ‘getting lost’ (Lather, 2007) Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) claim that ‘there is no heaven for concepts’ (p.5) will be given creative life.

These papers offer multiple innovative possibilities for action. They demonstrate a compulsion on the part of the contributors to generate change and to challenge those discourses and practices that inscribe and constrain thought, affect and action. This collection offers a call for engagement, connection and collective imagining based upon a belief that collaborative writing not only inquires into but activates a form of radicalism and subversion that has the potential to problematise the inegalitarian divisiveness and inherent conservatism of thinking and practice within contemporary neoliberal academic institutions.

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